DON BLUTH'S TOON TALK

Nov. 2000 Vol. 1 Number 4 Phoenix, AZ

Making A Mouse with Spielberg

Milt Kahl

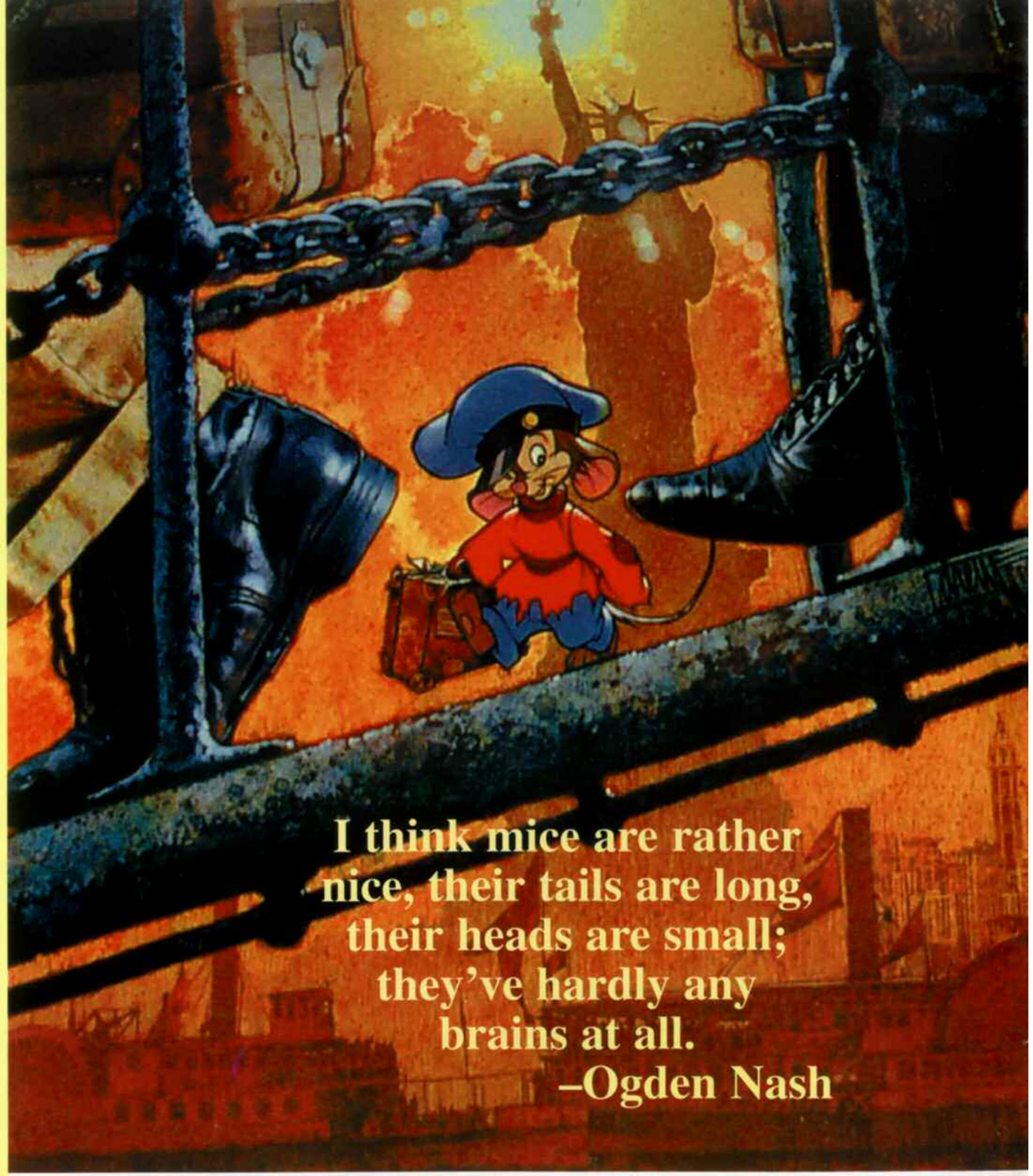
Disney Animation Legend

HeroBear and the Kid

Dragon's Lair Episode IV

$5.95

REVIEW



AN AMERICAN TAIL

A GLITTERING PHANTASMAGORIA NEVER BEFORE SEEN...

So said Ogden Nash in a child's poem, and the world nodded enthusiastically. In 1928, Walt Disney elevated the popular notion by presenting sophisticated movie fans with a cartoon short called *Steamboat Willie*, which introduced an impish rodent named Mickey Mouse. In spite of his jerky rambling dialogue, the little guy smoothly navigated his way into our hearts to become a household word, and an American icon. His merry antics dominated the animation short scene throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties, unchallenged, while the animated feature films drew the drapes aside revealing a glittering phantasmagoria never before seen, sweeping us skyward recapitulating our innocence with endearing stories, stories like *Snow White, Bambi, Pinocchio,* and *Dumbo*; and the list goes on. Then suddenly in 1985, like disappearing sparkles on the sea as the sun sinks below the horizon, the furnace of animation brilliance, dimmed, and nearly went out. ***The Black Cauldron*** was indeed a black moment at the box office. The critics nonchalantly surmised that the love affair with the cartoon was finally over as members of the Motion Picture Academy, with numbed indifference, shrugged it off. Soon, the Disney the corporation considered a resolution to pitch animation in the bin as a lost cause.

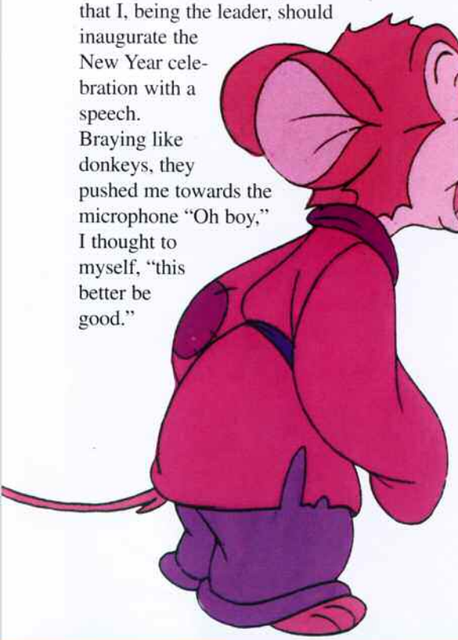
The picture you see on the opposite page is the movie poster heralding the arrival of another mouse to the animation area. In 1986, he rang the box office bell at a staggering $47,000,000 domestic, thus, kicking the Disney cynicism in the pants while encouraging them to stay in the game with an improved product. Just think, we could have lost ***The Little Mermaid*** **or** ***Beauty and the Beast.*** Thanks Fievel, thanks Steven, and thanks to Ogden Nash. Mice really are very nice.

James Horner, Steven Spielberg, Gary Goldman, and Don Bluth get a grip on the new project.

MAKING MICE WITH DISNEY AND SPIELBERG

The occasion was New Year's Eve in 1983. The company had footed the bill for a black tie swinging party to celebrate our good fortune in the gaming business, and also to kick the staff's morale up a notch. We hired a band. The music that night would have put a smile on Glen Miller's face, or even Tommy Dorsey's for that matter. As the brass blasted the thirties swing sound into the eighties, crystal rattled the on the tables, champagne flowed like water, and there wasn't a Levi in sight. There were explosions of laughter everywhere, exuberant, expressive, and healing. We were enjoying success. Then, at five minutes to midnight, a few revelers crossed the line from delirium to insanity and demanded that I, being the leader, should inaugurate the New Year celebration with a speech. Braying like donkeys, they pushed me towards the microphone "Oh boy," I thought to myself, "this better be good."

Enroute to America, Fievel goes overboard.



The noisy whistles, loud applause, and deafening screams, finally gave way to an even louder hush. I stared out into a sea of eager faces. So, did I say something profound? No, definitely not profound, not even provocative. What mumbled from my lips was an obscene mixture of arrogance and stupidity, "Money galore in eighty four," I shouted, with my fist in the air.

The crowd cheered and stamped their feet as the band blast out a chorus of "For he's a jolly good fellow." However, in that instant, I felt a chill zip down my spine. I knew I had just shattered our studios chances for a smooth year in 1984. My mind flashed instantly to the story of Ulysses; Ulysses, who boasted about his conquering of Troy, giving no credit to the Greek god, Poseidon. That angered the Deity, and nothing worked for Ulysses after that. For twenty years, the poor fellow battled misfortune as he endeavored to return back home. Wow! Was that now my destiny? Had this single arrogant remark from my mouth redirected the course of my fate? It seemed impossible; after all, it was the twentieth century. The gods were just myths, right? Yet, I knew in my heart that I had just blown it. A few weeks later, the arcade business took a plunge.

Consequently, the flow of money into the studio had stopped, and with it, the work on *Dragons Lair II*.

Fievel arrives at immigration via carrier pigeon.

It must be noted here, that I'm not suggesting my inappropriate remark at a party was the cause of the arcades losing business, no way! But it did bring misfortune to roost at my own door. I had forgotten to acknowledge "the Big Guy," and the windows of heaven through which all blessings flow, were closing fast. I remembered reading somewhere that the angels of Heaven sing and rejoice over even one soul who has a contrite spirit and a grateful heart. Somewhere, I knew in my case, a scowling archangel was locking the choir books in a cupboard and dismissing the singers. I prayed for a second chance. "Please, oh please... I'll never do it again."

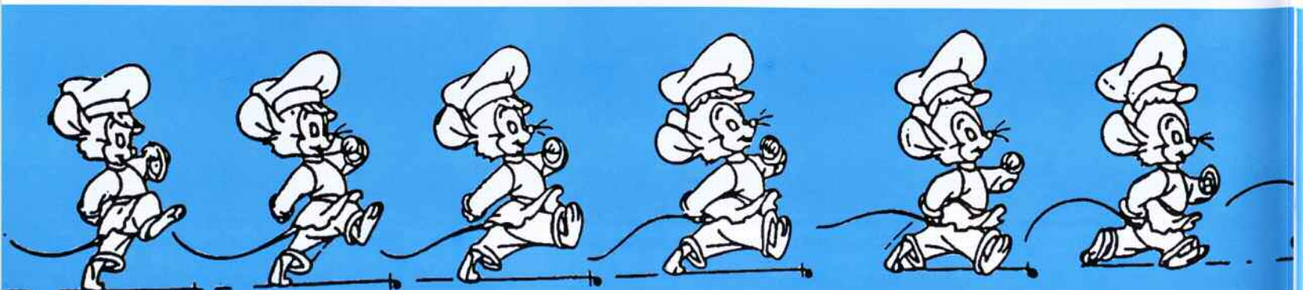
Jerry Goldsmith penned the gorgeous score to *The Secret of Nimh*. One day, Jerry called Gary to say, " I just screened *The Secret of Nimh* for a friend. I hope you don't mind, he really loved it and wants to meet you and Don. "Sure, why not" said Gary. " What's his name? He's the guy that directed that alien movie that blew us out of the water." Gary jumped in, "What! Are you talking about *E.T.*...the Spielberg *E.T.*?" "Yep!" Jerry laughed, "that's the one." I'll call you tomorrow with more details."

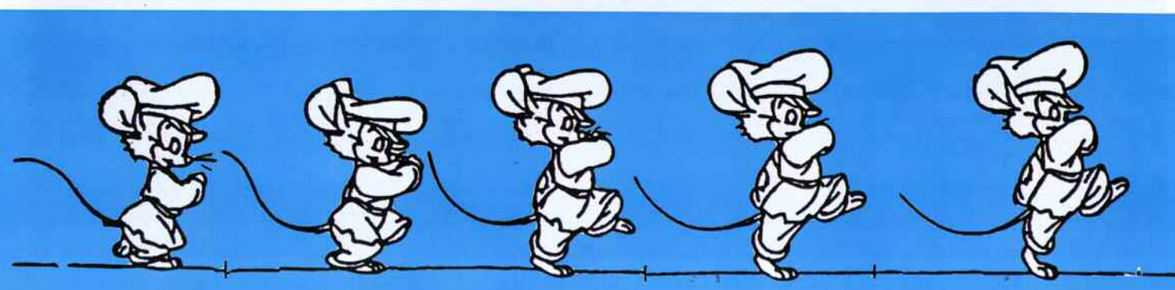
In Studio City, across the street from Jerry's Deli, stands a huge Swiss chalet-style building with a blue tile roof, home of American Savings, The Blue Star of India restaurant, and the tenant upstairs, Don Bluth Productions. It was one of those blistering afternoons when the sun mocked any attempt at breathing, when the air was tainted, or was it quickened with the scent of eucalyptus. I watched from the comfort of my office as a Porsche, glistening jade green, screeched to a halt in the parking lot. At once, I recognized the man stepping from the car. He was wearing baggy trousers, a Hawaiian shirt, and a baseball cap.

"That would be Spielberg", I whispered to myself, while bolting down the stairs to the lobby, "he's one hour early, and two years late, but Santa Claus, himself, could not have been more welcome. Suddenly, we were face-to-face and shaking hands. His broad smile and warm handshake was confident, eager, and anxious, all at the same time. Gary joined us, and the small talk was quickly replaced by mutual aspirations of creating an animation masterpiece. Those were the moments that laid the foundations for *An American Tail*, and a lasting friendship. It was a merry Christmas that year.

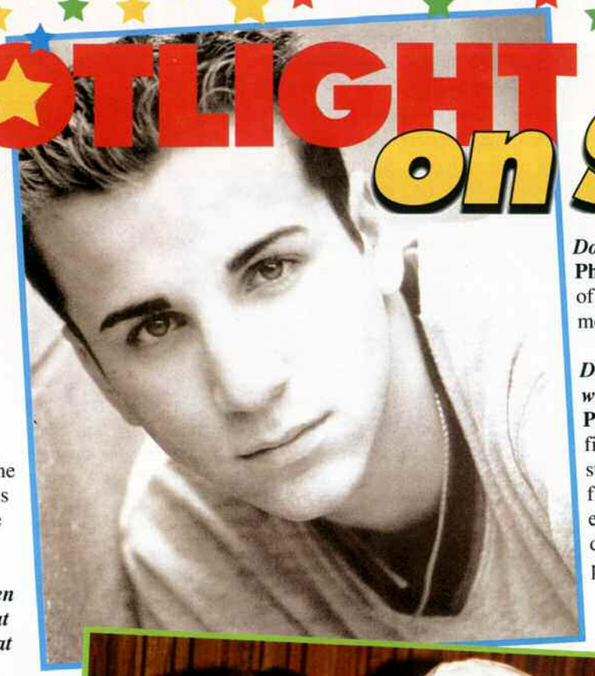
Above, Tiger the cat, the feline that got the mouse back home.

Below, Tony Taponi shows Fievel New York.





SPOTLIGHT on Stars



Don: How has it been for you, being a very famous mouse voice? Has it affected you in any way at all?
Philip: It gave me an entire career not just in the voice over business. I look at it as my big break. *American Tail* came out in 1986 and made this unheard of amount in the box office.

Don: What happens when your friends find out that you were the voice of that mouse?
Philip: Some of my friends tease me. It's weird because I say, "it's no big deal." Then they say, "you don't understand, I grew up with that movie." Even my wife says she used to cry when I sang Somewhere Out There.

Don: I don't think anyone will ever forget that moment. I met people when I was in Dublin that said, "that was the song on the radio when I was dating my girlfriend. That's our song."
Philip: I had a similar experience. I went on tour to promote the album in San Diego. So I'm out there signing some autographs, when a man came up to me and said, "I just want to let you know that I was in the Persian Gulf War; I was separated from my daughter, and that was our song. I didn't have a lot to hope for out there, but that sort of kept me going." It just caught me so off guard. I've heard tons of things, nice things. Here's a man that is serving our country, and he's telling me that the only thing keeping him going is the song I sang when I was six.

Don: True. By the way, do you still sing?
Philip: Yes I do. I still sing and play the piano.

Don: Do you compose?
Philip: Yes, you know I wrote a couple of songs that were in some independent movies.

Don: I was sure you would turn into a writer or a director.
Philip: Really, thanks. I remember the first day I met you in the studio and we started work on *American Tail*. As a five-year-old, I had no idea what to expect. But you were really a good director. That helped me settle into the part quickly.

Don: What's down the line for you? When you have your own kids and they watch* An American Tail, *will they understand that the voice of the little mouse is really you?
Philip: No, I doubt it. My voice is all grown up now. It's so funny, but people still come up to me and say, "do the voice." I still get that. I was still doing the Fievel voices at fifteen.

Don: There have not been many mice characters that could compete with Mickey. Do you think Fievel did?
Philip: Absolutely. *American Tail* set the standard with powerful story, Grammy award winning songs, and hot celebrity voices. You had Christopher Plummer, Madeline Kahn, Dom DeLuise, and a host of others, not to mention Philip Glasser. He wasn't too shabby either. After *American Tail's*, big box office success, then came the Disney reign of movies. A lot of people didn't realize that animation was waning, *Tail* got things going again.

Don: So, what did the mouse grow up to be? What's going on with you these days?
Philip: The mouse grew up to become . . . to become a fantastic guy with a fabulous career. I've done several commercials, some t.v. and a couple of movies. The last two years,

I was a regular on a t.v. series called ***Hangtime***, for NBC. I really enjoyed that.

Don: What do you dream of doing now?
Philip: For the last year, I have been putting together this movie that I am going to direct. It has consumed my life.

Don: How awful. I'm kidding of course, but isn't that the only way it will ever happen.
Philip: It's my directing debut.

Don: I knew it. I knew you would go off and do something like that. You poor thing, you are choosing a very lonely life.
Philip: Do you think? You may be right. My friends all treat me differently now; they are all hitting me up for parts. You know, I'm really nervous. I've done all my studying though, I've read all sorts of books, and I've been calling up all my friends that I have worked with in the past, scheduling lunches with them so I can pick their brains for ideas. I'm turning into a real nuisance.

Don: I don't think that's possible. I'm sure you will be great at this.
Philip: Yes but, I'm going to be tense until the first day of shooting, I just know it.

Don: I'm glad you read alot, literature will illuminate your life; it brings understanding. I saw Cathy Bates on the actor's workshop. She said something very powerful. It went like this, "You know, we're all just telling stories around the campfire, seeing who can tell the biggest whopper. In doing so we remind each other that we have very much in common, and that tears down the barriers of prejudice." I'm sure you've got some whoppers to tell.
Philip: I think I do. I hope I can do them justice.

Don: It's your turn. You're in the spotlight. You're the guy who conjured up a lot of dreams when you created the little mouse. It helped people through some rough times. So get me some photos and we will encore you in* ToonTalk. *Do you have any advice for its readers?
Philip: Well, I'm a firm believer in following your dreams. So, I guess my advice is, go for it. You can never know your true potential unless you try.

THE COLORS OF TAIL

Tiger the cat, confides in Fievel about his loneliness .

Papa Mousekowitz enchants his children with tales of America.

On board the ship to America, Fievel gets very bored.

Henri sings Never Say Never to encourage lost Fievel.

Henri the pigeon, discovers Fievel near the Statue of Liberty.

Fievel hears a violin and thinks he has found his papa.

Fievel sings Somewhere Out There as he dreams of being reunited with his family.

Warren T. Rat, leads Fievel into the city and the sweat shops.

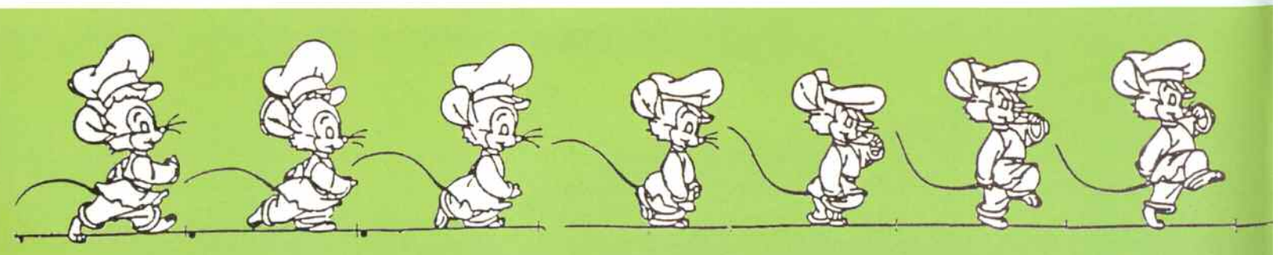
Bridgette and Honest John decide to help Fievel get home.

Shop Talk

ANIMATING JAKE THE SWALLOW

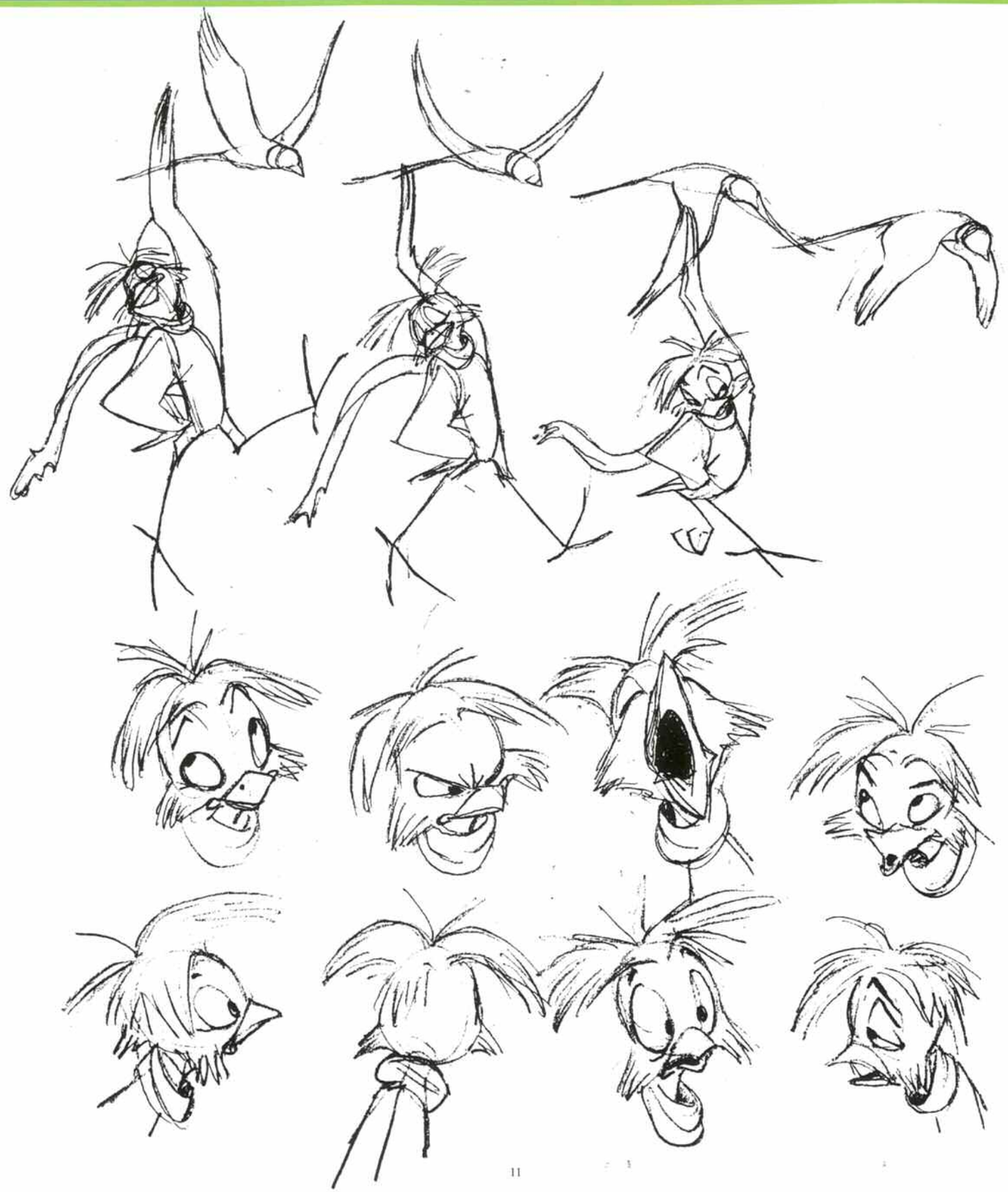
Having explored the process of boarding in *Toontalk's* September issue, I hope you've realized that finding those golden ideas is not unlike wading in shallow tide pools hunting for precious shells, discovering, keeping, discarding, and finally, moving on. But now my friends, it's time to take the plunge into the murky waters of animation itself. Murky I say, because that is what it can be unless you prep yourself for the swim. Animation, for some, is defined by rules. Rules, such as, changing shapes, squash and stretch, volumes, overlaps, primary actions, and so on. These disciplines, no doubt, are important to us all, but moving the student, the animator, or the entertainer out of the commonplace and towards the rare requires a key very special indeed. Actors are faced with clasping the same key as they take on the idiosyncrasies of another person. It's a pretend game they play, a flight into fancy, a masking of oneself in the guise of another. To display the mask convincingly however, actors must explore who indeed lives behind the assumed mask. Explore the labyrinth of the soul; feel its fears and embrace its joys, never settling for the stereotype that avoids the issue. No person, thank god, is exactly like anyone else. Each individual is unique. Great actors find a character that takes the audience off guard, a character that surprises them.

In the movie, *As Good As It Gets*, Jack Nicholson plays a man with a compulsive disorder, and whose behavior is just unpredictable. He appears to be mean spirited, a soul deprived of social facility, incapable of even loving a dog. Well, of course, I do want to know what will become of such a person.



FLYING, WALKING OR DRAWING EXPRESSIONS.

JUST DRAW IT!



Shop Talk

JEREMY, THE CROW, CAPTURED BY THE CALL OF THE WILD, IS SUBDUED.

I'm captivated by this personality that the writer, director and actor too, have created. I'm pushed beyond curiosity. I'm compelled to watch. So here are some questions. What is the key to enlisting your audience, and how can I apply it to the little barn swallow in *The Happy Prince*?

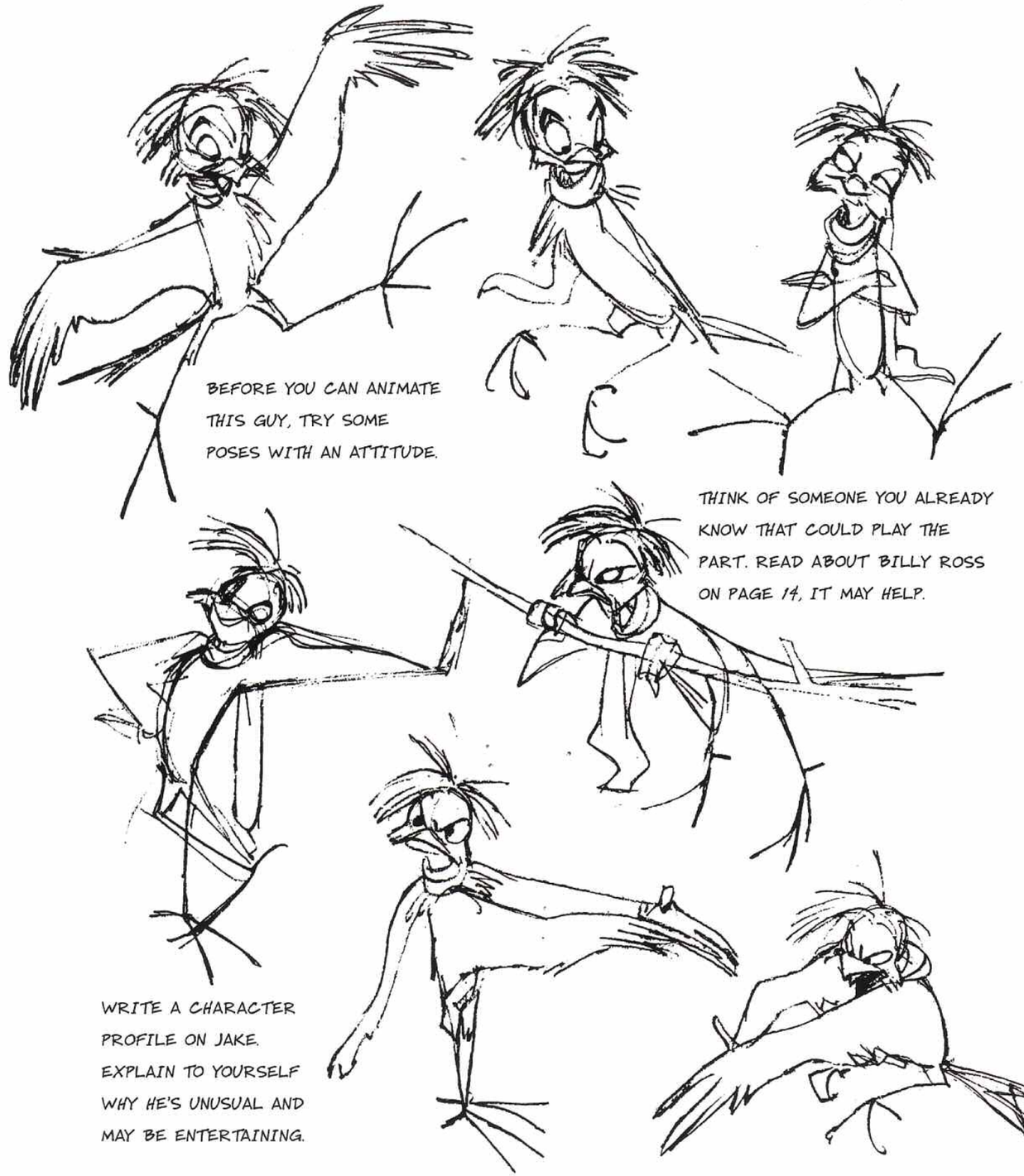
Upon first reading the book *The Rats of NIMH*, I noted that Jeremy the crow, although involved in the plot to find the great owl for Mrs. Brisby, was only mildly interesting. While pondering this dilemma, I suddenly flashed upon the name Bruce Macintyre, an old college roommate, a stout handsome chap whose winsome but clumsy demeanor was better suited to the romantic exploits of a gothic hero rather than a student in real life on campus. College, for him, had nothing to do with education, he was there searching for Miss Right. "She's out there, somewhere" Bruce would say, "and when I find her, I'm gonna take her in my arms and I'm gonna..." "Okay Bruce, I get the picture, I get it." I always interrupted him, a bit concerned where his dialogue was going.

In counterpoint to his romantic gush and winning smile, Bruce had a clumsy, awkward, farm boy swagger, and large sinewy feet, the kind you develop by jumping too frequently off haystacks and tromping barefoot through the muddy fields while irrigating the corn. Indeed, he was awkward, clumsy, rural, and rough. The women sensed it and stayed away. How, pray tell, was such a man to find Miss Right? God love him, he was like a male rhino in the rutting season. Could it be, I thought, could it be possible to put Bruce's personality inside Jeremy, the crow? Why not? It would give Mrs. Brisby a challenge to deal with besides just the plot. Yes, Bruce's struggle had enraged my attention, even enlisted my heart. Maybe it could capture the audience's as well. Still, I felt there was something missing, something that would make Jeremy sympathetic; something beyond a mere sex starved animal. The answer came from the chronicles of the *Xanadu* project; specifically, an entry entitled *The Amorous Irene.*

In 1513, Ponce de Leon set sail to find the mythical fountain of youth, but failed. Although it was never publicized, in 1980 a woman named Irene, without ship or crew, claimed to have succeeded, or so she said. I met this woman. The body of this 49-year-old, mother-of-three teenage boys was untouched by the ravages of time. She had a round pie shaped face with serendipity eyes, dark brown and expressive. Her fleshy bosom was always well displayed and also the centerpiece of her voluptuous assets. Yes, Irene was a work of art, but we had hired her for her culinary skills. She was the cook for the animation crew working on *Xanadu*. Oh, and by the way, did I also mention that she sang? Well she did, bellowing, full out, at the top of her lungs like some Wagnerian Soprano, all the while clattering the dishes into the sink and keeping time with her hips to a rock beat on the radio. "Why so happy," I asked one day. "It's the call of the wild," she laughed. "I feel it here, deep in here. Her eyes suddenly became lurid, sensual, filled with desire as she tossed her head and clutched at her bosom for a dramatic effect while flipping lemon joy suds in my face. "Don't you feel it Don?" she giggled. "Don't you?" Hmm, I thought. What's going on here? Then it hit me. She was craving something alright, and I was it. "Irene," I stuttered, "think of your children, and Roger, you're a married woman for heavens sake!" Giggling, she flipped more bubbles in my face, this time, with both hands. "Irene, stop this at once," I snapped, grabbing her by the wrists. "Don't fight it Don," she pleaded, "It's too big. It's the call of the wild. Go with it my darling, you must. No...no, we must. It is useless to resist. "Not at all," I snapped. "Not for this little duck. I'm not on the menu, you got that?" As I bolted from the kitchen sweating, the singing resumed. She was a woman possessed, and it was true, she was helpless to resist. The wind bloweth where it will, they say, and Irene was riding a cyclone. I felt no anger towards her behavior. She was honest. Besides, it was the call of the wild. That night while lying in bed, I laughed right out loud. What a strange entertaining woman. Better still, why me?

The amorous Irene entry ends here. But it was she who gave Jeremy his handle. Or, maybe it was both she and Bruce, with Dom DeLuise. Anyway, that's how it came to be.

STRIKE A POSE!

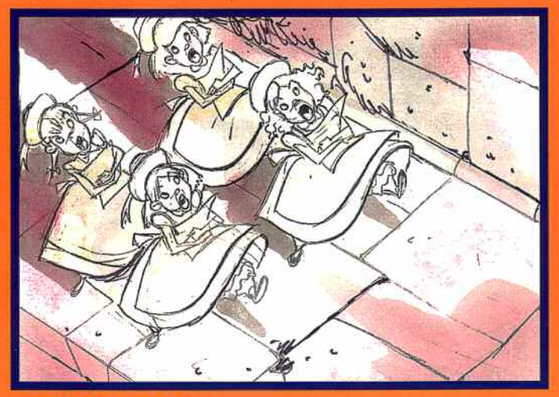

BEFORE YOU CAN ANIMATE THIS GUY, TRY SOME POSES WITH AN ATTITUDE.
THINK OF SOMEONE YOU ALREADY KNOW THAT COULD PLAY THE PART. READ ABOUT BILLY ROSS ON PAGE 14, IT MAY HELP.
WRITE A CHARACTER PROFILE ON JAKE. EXPLAIN TO YOURSELF WHY HE'S UNUSUAL AND MAY BE ENTERTAINING.

And so continuing with the boarding process, I am painfully aware that Jake, the swallow, is still an enigma waiting to be solved. At present he's a drawing stuck to a piece of paper Like *Pinocchio*, he awaits the touch of the wand, or any other divine intervention the gods might be charitable enough to bestow.So, let's get at it. At present, the little bit of information I know about Jake could fill a postage stamp. He's selfish. He doesn't keep with the flock, and eventually, his environment will kill him. Of course, it is always "the whys" that breathe vitality into a character so let's explore them.

Jake knew the consequences of parking himself in London in the bitter cold of winter. It was as if he were tethered there, tied to an object of inestimable desire that stops him from flying to Egypt. Rummaging through my own grab bag of memories, I bumped into Billy Ross, an acquaintance and eventual friend from junior high school. Billy, even at thirteen, was a mysterious guy. He was tall for his age, filled with vitality, processed a boastful personality, and a lusty humor. His pants were rags, his shoes tattered with knotted laces; and his thick hair, unmanageable and red, hid protruding ears. His jokes were weird and often got laughs, but when he told stories, ah...the playground halted in captured silence. His gory blood dripping tales, mostly about his father who was a rodeo clown in a traveling show, procured him the title of most exciting student on a boring campus. We all envied Billy for his adventurous father who faced death on a daily basis, and triumphed. I, and many others, even gave him our lunch money for the privilege of hearing about those muzzled secret disasters with the bulls that sent men to the bone yard. Things he'd seen with his own eyes, holy tomato, he had actually seen men die! How frequently I reflected upon my own drab existence until one day, the fog lifted, and I learned that his father was killed in an auto accident years ago, before Billy was even born. This fact shook me. I could not forget the passionate expressions on Billy's face as he told those stories. How could he make it all up? I, being farm born, could sense his drive, his will, and his necessity to pull himself from the muck of the cow corral to be somebody, to gain respect, to cement friendships. I never let on that I knew; I could feel his loneliness reaching desperately for contact and on subsequent journeys into fantasy, I was there. I liked him even more!

Is Billy a possible Jake? The clue lies in the relationship between the repentant statue and the lonely little bird that perhaps, longs for a friend.

MATH TEACHER: HOW DO YOU KNOW? YOU'VE NEVER SEEN ONE.



SCHOOLGIRLS:
AH...BUT WE HAVE IN OUR DREAMS.

NARR: THE SCHOOLMASTER FROWNED AND LOOKED VERY SEVERE, FOR HE DID NOT APPROVE OF CHILDREN DREAMING.

The HAPPY PRINCE

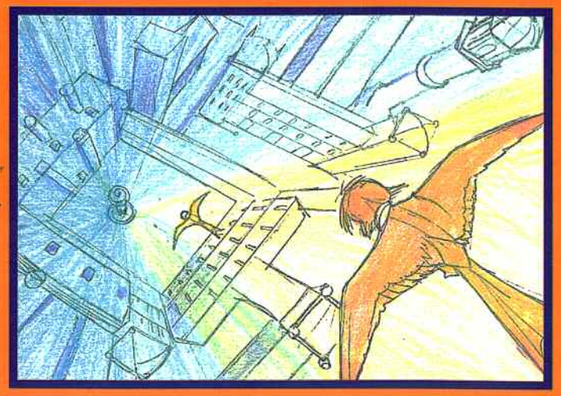
SCHOOLMASTER THROWS HIS STAFF INTO THE AIR.

CUT TO: (DOWN SHOT) SCHOOLMASTER AND CHILDREN CONTINUE DOWN THE STREET, AS CAM PANS UP TO A NIGHT SKY...THE STAFF BECOMES A FLUTE.

MORPHS INTO THE LITTLE SWALLOW, JAKE.

THE FLUTE FLYS UPWARDS, AS A CRESCENDO OF NOTES SPARKLE AND BECOME STARS IN A NIGHT SKY.

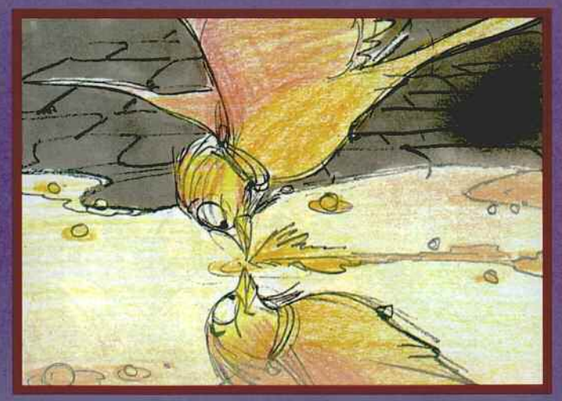
THE FLUTE GAINS OUT. AS A SINGLE LARGE NOTE TUMBLES ONTO THE SCREEN AND...



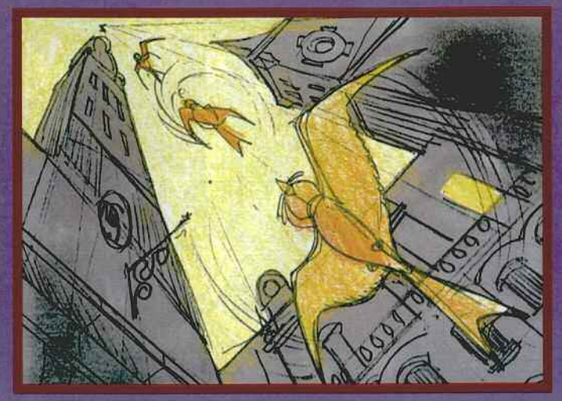
JAKE DIVES DOWN TOWARD THE CITY.
NARR: ONE NIGHT, THERE FLEW OVER THE CITY...

NARR: ...A LITTLE SWALLOW. HIS FRIENDS HAD GONE AWAY TO EGYPT SIX WEEKS BEFORE...

NARR: ...BUT HE HAD STAYED BEHIND FOR HE WAS IN LOVE...



NARR: ...WITH THE MOST BEAUTIFUL REED.



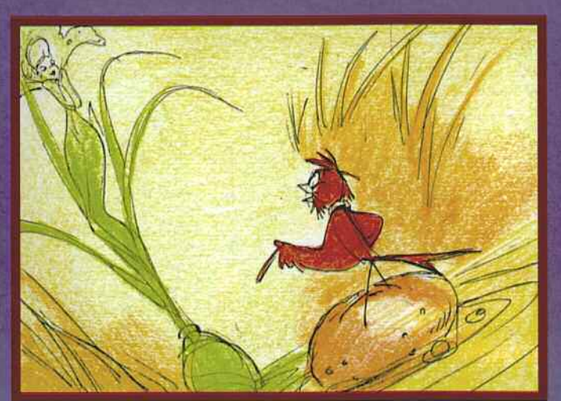
MUSIC STARTS: INTO TO SONG.

X-DISS

THE LOVELY REED GRACEFULLY CURTSEYS IN THE WIND.

X-DISS

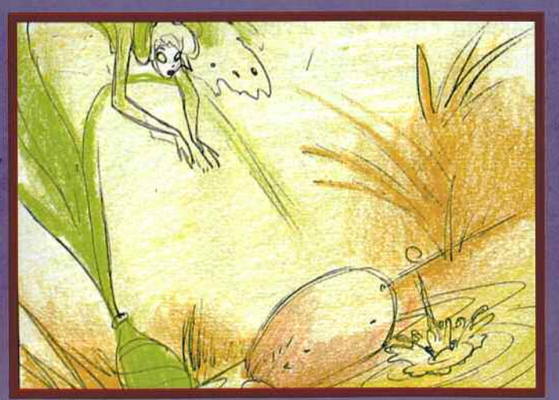
JAKE: WOW! YOU GOTTA BE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL REED IN THE WHOLE WORLD.



THE REED MAKES A LOW BOW...

...ONCE AGAIN AND KISSES JAKE.

...WHO SPLASHS INTO THE WATER.



TO BE CONTINUED.

YOU'LL RECALL THAT VRAXXIS, HAVING DRUNK THE ELIXIR WHICH GAVE HIM HUMAN FORM, DID SLAY THE ALCHEMIST SERIN, WITH A POWER THAT NONE KNEW HE POSSESSED. AND KICKING THE CORPSE OF THE USURPER OFF THE ROYAL THRONE, FORTHWITH INSTALLED HIMSELF . . .

DRAGON'S LAIR

REIGN OF TERROR
EPISODE IV

VRAXXIS BECAME THE NEW KING. THUS BEGAN HIS REIGN OF TERROR.

THE POWER IS MINE AND NO ONE SHALL TAKE IT FROM ME...EVER!

WELL PAL, I WOULDN'T BET MONEY ON THAT. THE BABY GOT AWAY.

NOT WHILE I BREATHE!

WHAT BABY? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

THE KING AND QUEEN ARE DEAD, BUT THEIR SON STILL LIVES. HE WILL RECLAIM THE THRONE!

OKAY, DON'T PANIC. EVERYTHING'S GOING TO BE FINE. SURE THE KING AND QUEEN ARE DEAD AND THE FUTURE OF THE KINGDOM IS IN MY HANDS, BUT ASIDE FROM THAT...

IT'S BEEN A FABULOUS EVENING. AT LEAST YOU TWO ARE SAFE.

I HAVE TO HAND IT TO THEIR MAJESTIES, THAT DECOY BUSINESS WORKED LIKE A CHARM.

IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL WHICH OF YOU IS THE PRINCE AND...

WHICH IS... UH OH.

SO...SEBASTIAN GOT CONFUSED. SO WHAT. HE DECIDED TO RAISE THEM BOTH. SECRETLY, OF COURSE, FOR HE KNEW THAT BY NOW VRAXXIS WOULD KNOW OF THE ROYAL CHILD, AND WOULD PERSUE HIM.

HE SEQUESTERED THE INFANTS IN THE SWAMPS OF PERDITION, WHERE NO MORTAL HAD EVER SET FOOT...AND...

HE GAVE THEM TWO COMMON NAMES, DIRK AND DARIN.

AND LIKE A LOVING FATHER READ TO THEM FROM THE GOOD BOOK, INSTILLING SENSITIVY, MANNERS AND GENTLE CONDUCT.

CRASH

THUD

SEBASTIAN TAUGHT THEM CIVILITY AND REASON, AND...

AND...RESTRAINT. HE FELT IT WAS HIS DUTY TO PREPARE THE YOUNG PRINCE, WHICHEVER OF THE TWO LADS IT MIGHT TURN OUT TO BE, TO WALK IN THE WAYS OF THE COURT.

POW

THAT'S IT! THAT'S ALL YOU GOT LITTLE BROTHER? PATHETIC!

WELL, THAT'S YOUR HISTORY LESSON.

LITTLE? DIRK, THE ONLY THING LITTLE IN THIS ROOM IS YOUR BRAIN.

OH YEAH! WELL, MY BRAIN IS BIGGER THAT YOURS!

THAT'S NOT WHAT I'VE HEARD!

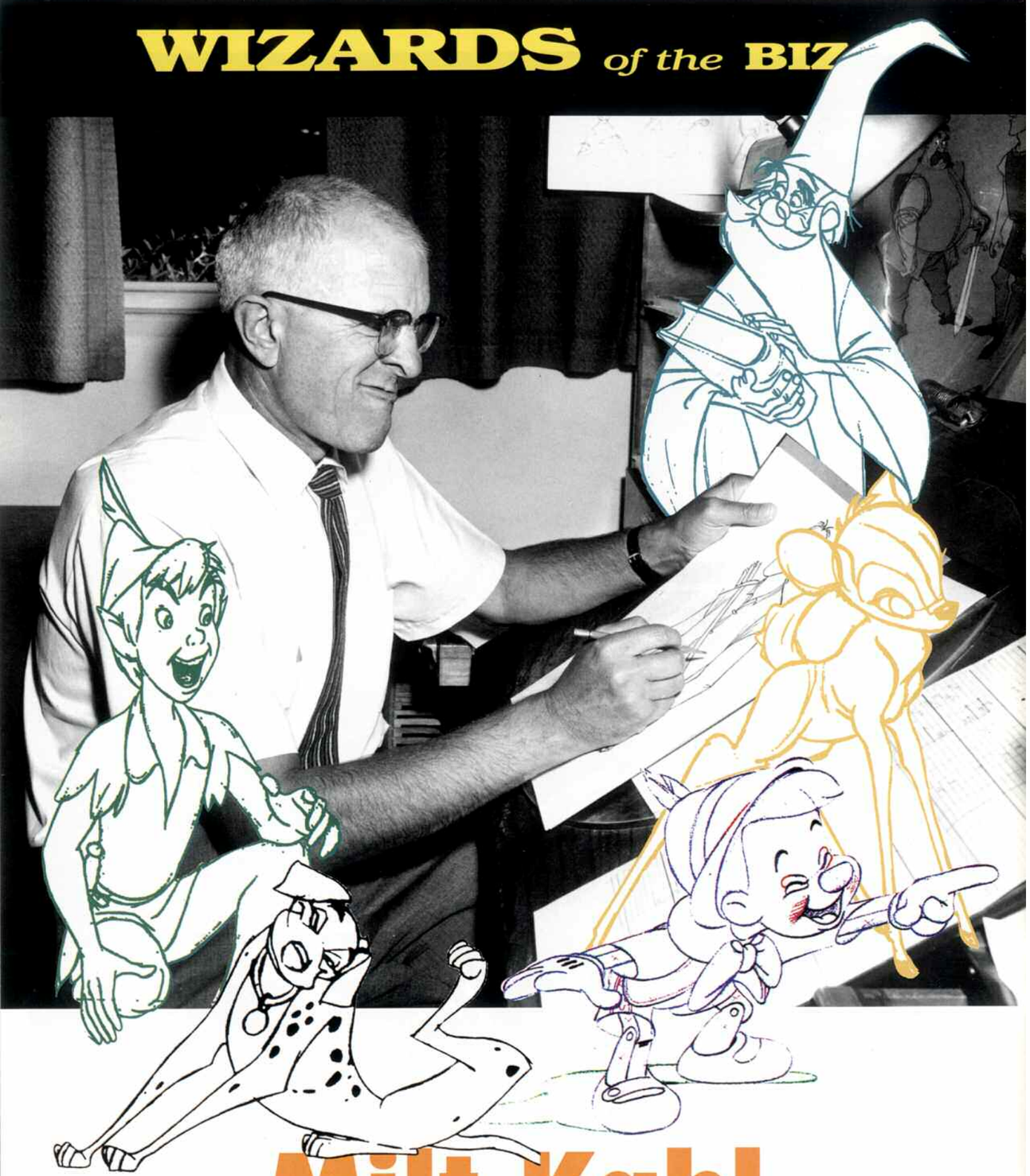
SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A KNOCK AT THE DOOR. HOW COULD THIS BE? WHO WOULD ENTER THE SWAMPS OF PERDITION?

KNOCK! KNOCK!

Don Bluth

. . . to be continued

WIZARDS of the BIZ



Milt Kahl

A Disney Animation Legend

"Snoops, you are entirely too soft!"

During my apprenticeship with John Lounsbery, I noted that when he was having trouble with a drawing he would toss the pencil and announce he was going to D-wing to see Milt Kahl. I knew what that meant. I knew what courage it took to even enter D-wing. It was the abode of the Olympians, a holy ground, a dwelling place for animators already canonized in the flesh. I was only eighteen then but I was warned that the unwashed masses were unwelcome in D-wing, so, I stayed out. "If I'm not back in an hour," John said, "send in the swat team." Of course he was joking, but I don't think entirely.

Although Milt had a reputation for being long on talent, he was conversely, short on patience. In fact, he was such a perfectionist that sometimes he could be cruel. He was not the kind of man you reasoned with, but rather, the kind to be listened to. In the realm of design, he was king, queen, and the whole court all rolled into one. All this was daunting, yes, but more disconcerting was the pellet gun. They were only rumors of course, but some said, if you listened closely at his door, you could hear the popping as Milt emptied the gun into a riddled wall of Burbank telephone directories. Marksmanship was one of his two hobbies; the other was fly-fishing. He was a master of both, and a prickly man. Still, all agreed, it was worth the risk approaching Milt. If he made you just one drawing, whatever else your animated scene might become, it would at least look great, guaranteed.
I often wondered if all the bad press circulating about his cantankerous nature wasn't his own creation, you know, the same reason any sovereign surrounds his castle with a moat filled with ravenous alligators. Within the hour, John returned grinning while holding the cherished drawing like some fuzzy bear he'd just won tossing dimes into cups at the Long Beach Pike. "He makes it look so easy," John said, slapping his hand to his head. "And it's weird, the way he does it. He draws the silhouettes then fills in the details. Nobody does that, nobody!" The year was 1956. I was still eighteen. My hands trembled as he handed me the prize. "King Stephan," I whispered, "wow! It's fantastic. You know... you just sort of get it right off, huh? It reminds me of a Van Gogh, or a Picasso." "He's the man," John sighed blushing. "The rest of us are just amateurs."

I left Disney that same year. As the winds of change howled, they blew me like a leaf, far away, to the refining fires of Argentina. But then, that's another story!

My next encounter with Milt was in 1971. Returning to Disney Studio, I was tested for animation skills for six weeks then reclassified as an animator and led by Johnny Bond to my new mentor, Frank Thomas, and my new location, D-wing. "Holy moly," I thought, "I'll be working right inside the furnace and near him, the ubiquitous Milt Kahl." Dread overpowered me. I found myself tiptoeing past his closed door as I came and went, praying all the while that it would never open but knowing, however, that it was inevitable. Then it happened. "Don," came the voice shouting down the hall. Mid sneak, I wheeled around. "Yes?" I had never officially met Milt Kahl, and though I had spoken this mans name hundreds of times, it never occurred to me that he might know mine. "Yes Mr. Kahl...a..yes.." Now I can look relaxed under pressure, even cool. I've done it hundreds of times in my life, but this definitely was not one of them. "Come here," he barked. "There's a...a test here. You might wanna see...it's a...it's the Medusa." I gathered around the moviola with several animators as Milt's assistant, Stan Green, pushed on the pedal. Clackety clack, the machine cranked the film showing us the very first glimpses of the masters newest creation.

MEDUSA

TIGGER & PRINCE JOHN

MILT & HIS CATS

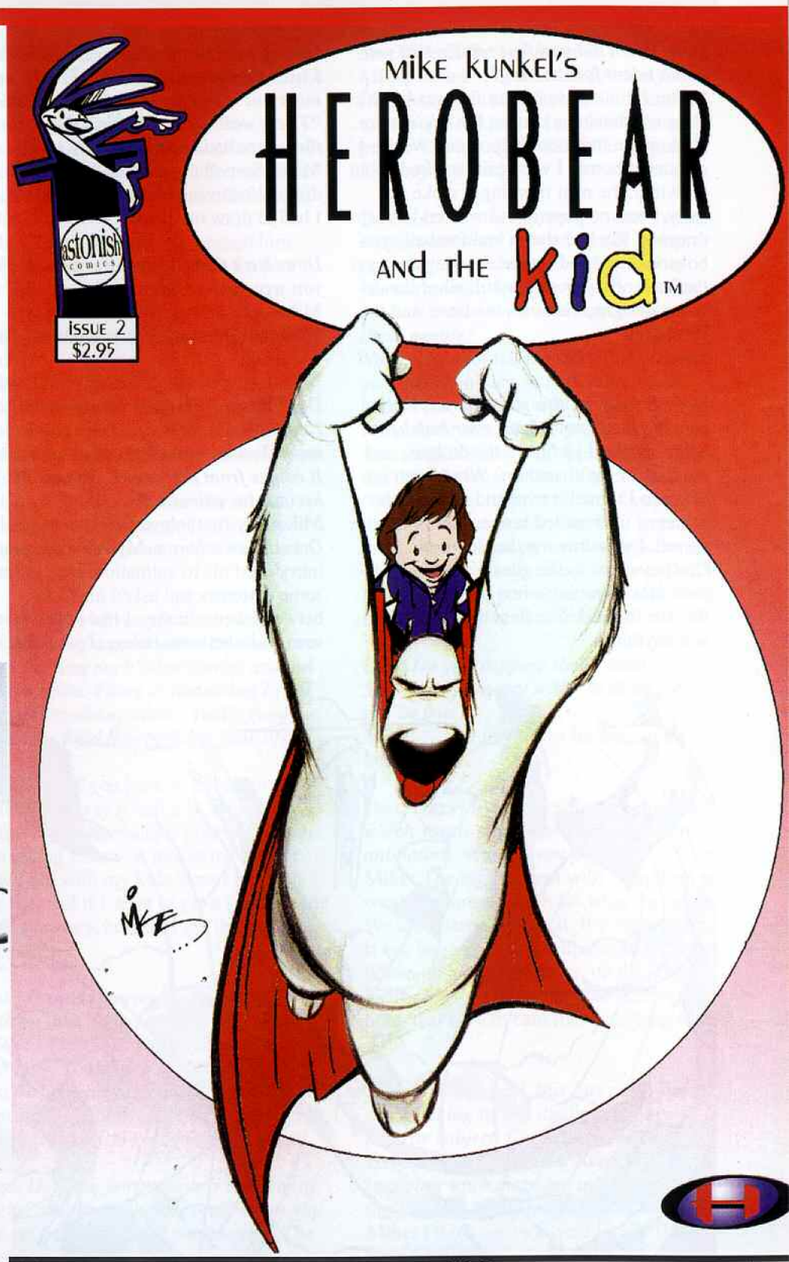
"Snoops, you don't have a way with children. You are too soft," purred the sensuous voice of Geraldine Page, while I stood enthralled by the character on the screen. It was a magic moment. Whatever dynamics was going on in the real world regarding Milts idiosyncrasies, his reputation, or how we all judged him, it all paled for me at that instant. The Medusa drawings were flawless, the acting superb. But more revealing, I got a glimpse of Milt, the child, and my own fear of him vanished. We became good friends. I myself peeked over his shoulder to be instructed, not by his speech, which was halted and slow, but by watching him draw. It was as if the gods had given Milt the key to animation wizardry, then, like a cruel joke, bound his speech so he could explain it to no one. He was one of a kind, like a peacock unaware of his own beauty.

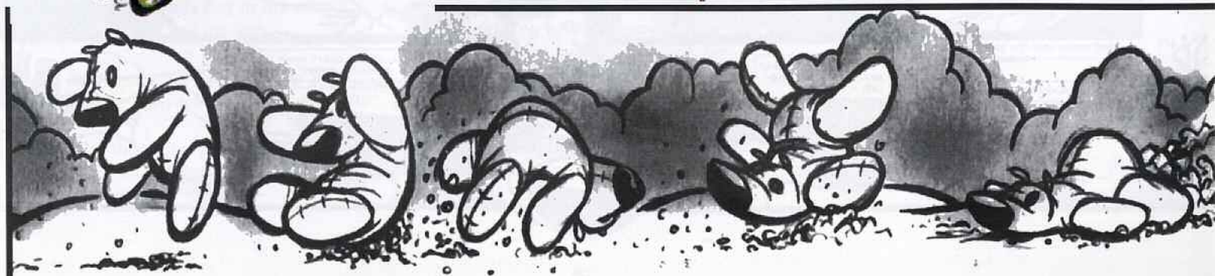
As yet Lounsberys summation of Milts genius remains the most accurate. Milt is the master, the rest of us are amateurs.

The Pitch

ToonTalk delights in recognizing Mike Kunkel, a 28-year-old Disney employee and the entrepreneur of a fabulous comic strip called *Hero Bear and the Kid*. It was at the San Diego Comicon that I stumbled onto this exciting talent, and right off liked his style and message. He's been drawing since he was a wee grasshopper, and it shows, I mean really shows, and he's likable to boot. If you get to the Comicon next year, he'll be there. Hunt him down. You'll be in for a real treat.

Mike consented to be interviewed for *ToonTalk* which we did twice, yes twice, owing to my incredible sensitivity. You see, during the first interview, I forgot to push the tape record button – oh stupidness! Anyway, we got it the second time.





The Pitch

Don: When did you first realize that you had a talent for drawing?
Mike: I think it was about first grade. Our class was having a contest for a poster for Halloween, my mom helped me. We drew a haunted house. I was really excited about drawing. The next morning, I woke up early. I had no paper, but I wanted to keep drawing. My bed sheets had football symbols on them, so I started drawing them on the back of my poster board, all of the different designs, the rams, the bears and the Pittsburgh
steelers.

Don: Let me get this straight, you were copying the figures from your bedsheets.
Mike: Right, I just liked the designs, and the look of the characters. When I ran out of space I turned it over and drew on the poster of the haunted house. I think I was crazed. I was drawing the Bears and the Cowboys next to the ghosts and the skeletons. Next morning when my mom saw this she freaked. Needless to say, I didn't win anything.

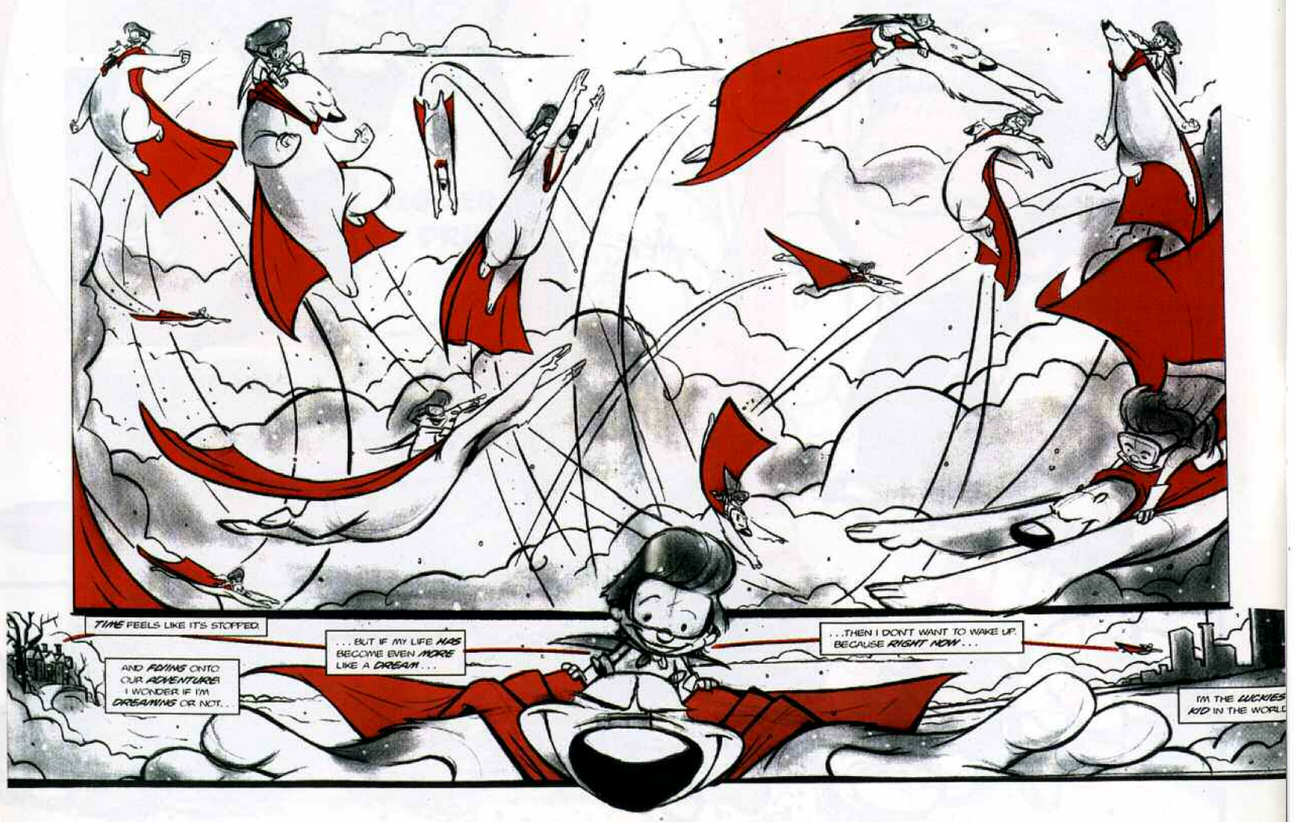
Don: I went through something similar. I used to draw on the walls. Finally my mom put me in my own room and said, "These walls only. Draw on them. But not the ones outside this room!"
Mike: Something clicked. I just had to draw. Whatever materials I could find, I had to draw on them.

Don: Isn't that strange, it is almost like you were pre-programmed.
Mike: Yes, It was like something was telling me, okay, now it is time for you to come out.

Don: When I first saw your drawing style, I thought, this is not just any comic book artist. You have the style of an animator. It comes from that arena. So how did you become an animator?
Mike: My first job was on a movie called *Once Upon a Forest*. My friend, Jason, introduced me to animation. He gave me some extremes and asked me to in-between them. Jiminy, I had never even seen an in-between before. I sat down in his art room and did my first in-betweens. I don't even remember what the characters where. They were Xeroxes of something or other. Whatever it was, it took me all day to do just two in-betweens.

Don: Was there an animated film that you saw that inspired you?
Mike: Honestly, I can't even say there was one in particular; I've always had an attraction to cartoons. As a kid, one of my favorites was *Pecos Bill*. Oh yes, and *Johnny Appleseed*, both of them from *Melody Time*. They just sort of clicked with me. I could see myself doing that, animating. For a long time I had wanted to be a comic strip artist, but then, when I realized that I could bring the drawings to life, I was hooked. Wow!

Don: So why do you think the notion of animating really hit home with you?
Mike: It was the excitement of it. Why should I settle for a still drawing when I could see them come to life? This next bit will sound weird. My girlfriend, who later became my wife, used to travel in her job. It always made me sad when she went away on her trips. Since I could already draw her, if she stayed away too long, I simply brought her to life with animation. It wasn't as good as having her here, but it did cheer me up.


TIME FEELS LIKE IT'S STOPPED
AND ARMS ONTO OUR ADVENTURE! I WONDER IF I'M DREAMING OR NOT...
...BUT IF MY LIFE HAS BECOME EVEN MORE LIKE A DREAM...
...THEN I DON'T WANT TO WAKE UP. BECAUSE RIGHT NOW...
I'M THE LUCKIEST KID IN THE WORLD

Don: As you were growing up, who were your heroes?
Mike: Growing up, I didn't know any individual animators, just studios. I liked your films Don. I liked the Disney films, and I liked the old Warner Bros cartoons. They were all tremendous for me; I connected with them. For an artist, it was like waving a red flag at a bull. Having said that, I have to admit that I am a huge fan of Norman Rockwell, and I can't leave out Don Martin of *Mad Magazine*.

Don: Man, your taste just runs the whole gambit, huh?
Mike: I went through a phase where I drew nothing but Garfield, I don't know why. I just drew Garfield after Garfield.

Don: That's a good thing. All that practice with the pencil explains why your drawing style looks so fluid.
Mike: I get accused of being a sponge. The truth is, I just absorb whatever I am around. You know, that's what I love about being here at the Disney Studio. There are so many diverse and talented artists; I'm like a kid in a candy store.

Don: As you approach your story of* HeroBear and the Kid*, tell me how you puzzle this out. I remember you mentioning to me that you work the whole thing like a movie, with one, two, and three acts. Then the strip is exploring the details. Is that the case?
Mike: I have the whole series very much in my head. I try to break it down into little scenes, but I'm really thinking of it as a movie. Even though the characters are not moving, if the poses are strong I still get a lot out of it.

Don: Who is the little boy in the story?
Mike: That's me, and my son.

Don: Sort of the two of you rolled into one. And the bear, who is it that plays the bear?
Mike: I'm the bear. I put a little of myself into all the characters. In reality, the bear is like the big brother, or friend I always wanted; the hero I always admired, maybe the hero in all of us.

Don: Is he a mentor, or guardian angel, who helps you get through the rough times? Everybody has a guardian angel, I think.
Mike: Yes, I think you've pegged him. He is the part of us that's good, the part that's divine.

Don: Are these characters very real for you?
Mike: I have grown up with them. I've had the idea for so long.

Don: It isn't something that came to you only recently.
Mike: No, these characters have been kicking around inside me for twelve to fifteen years. It was an itch that needed scratching.

Don: You are obviously a storyteller besides being a good artist. In a way, we are all telling each other stories around the campfire. There is something I find compelling about stories, really good ones. The kind that reshape your life, in a way.
Mike: When you have to tell a story, or figure out a way to tell it to somebody, it makes you re-evaluate yourself. When I'm telling a story, it makes me look at how I am with my kids, how I am with my life, and if I want to get a good feeling from the story, how do I get that to happen?

Don: Do your stories usually have a point to them, like a moral?
Mike: I like the type of films or stories that leave you with something. You feel you've had an emotional moment. Maybe it makes you think about something good. I never get political or anything like that.

Don: Do your stories have a moment of flight? You know that moment when you are set free, no longer earthbound. The problem gets solved, the chains break, and you jettison upward leaving your cares behind. Do your stories look for that moment?
Mike: Absolutely. For me it's a moment of recognition, a moment I realize I've really accomplished something, or feel euphoric in my environment.

Don: That's the epiphany.
Mike: I think it is different for everyone. I write my scripts to feel this moment in exactly the right spot. I get letters from people who connect with different parts. It's very revealing.

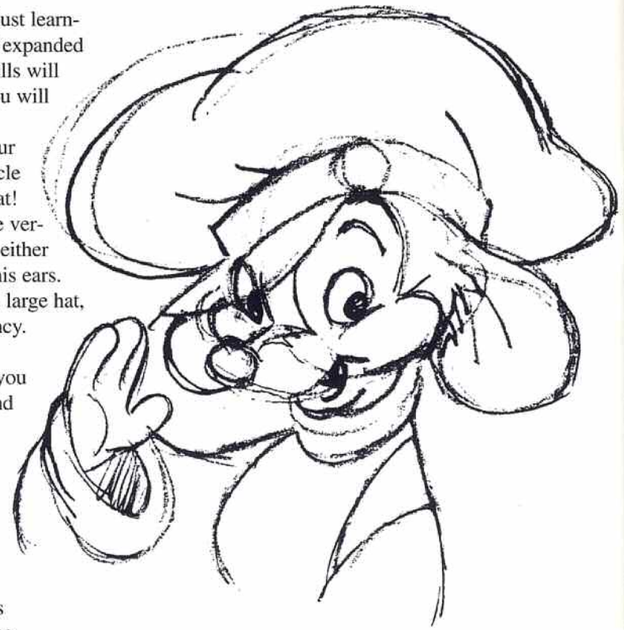
Don: Lets say that there are some young readers out there that are really trying to get into this business, and they look at your drawings. You are now the mentor. What is it that you could say to encourage these people?
Mike: Draw or tell the story that is truth to you. And don't try and out think somebody. Plan out the story for you. I read somewhere along time ago about Chuck Jones and how they did the cartoons. They did them for themselves. It was funny to them. It just so happened everybody else liked the cartoons also. But they weren't doing them just to please the Bugs Bunny fans. In storytelling, take your time. Don't rush it, because you never know what will happen in the twenty-third hour.

Don: Do you suppose that's what Shakespeare meant with "to thine own self be true?"
Mike: "...and thou canst be false to no man," right.

Don: Drawing is a very human process which seems to get lost with computer animation, what do you think?
Mike: The big problem with computers is we don't care as much for what we create. We are distanced from it. It is on a screen. It can be saved and manipulated. If it is drawn on a piece of paper, on the other hand, it is something tangible that we can hold, that we can care for, something fragile.

Don: Well Michael, this has really been great talking to you again about my favorite subject. Congratulations on* HeroBear and the Kid. *Keep up the inspiring work there are a lot of us cheering for you. Are there any final words?
Mike: I think we've covered it all. Thanks Don.

JUNIOR TOONERS



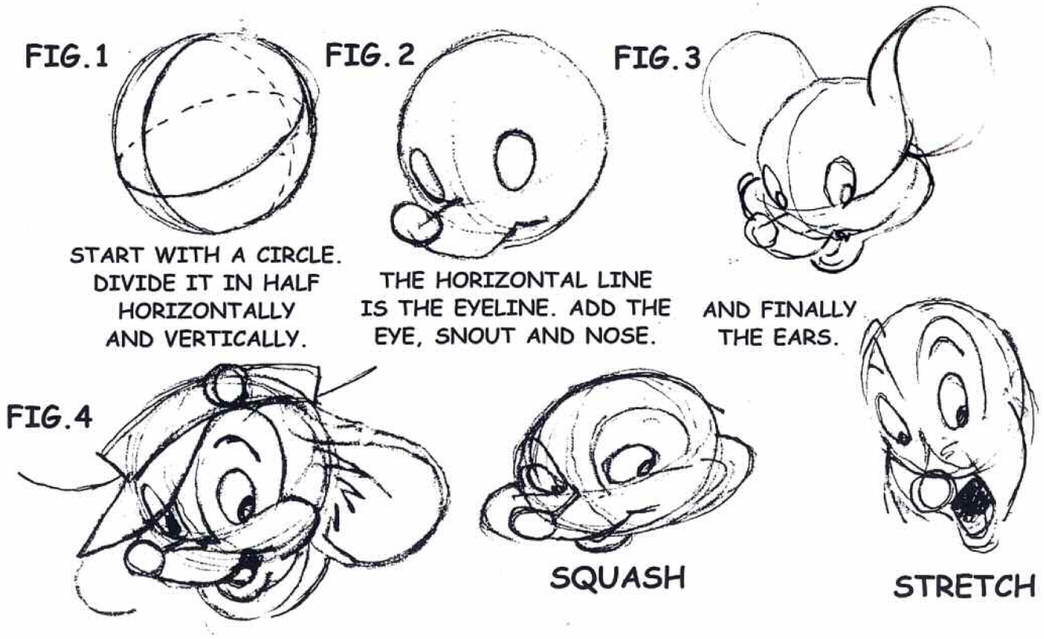
Maybe you think we've forgotten about all you tooners who are just learning to draw. Well, we haven't! In this issue of *ToonTalk*, we've expanded the page count to include some basic drawing lessons. Your skills will be greatly enhanced by just following a few simple rules. Of course, you will still need to practice them.

Lets begin. You see the Fievel on this page? Lets draw his head in four easy steps. For now, it's okay to copy exactly what you see. Draw a circle and try to visualize this circle as a three-dimensional ball, that is, not flat! Now divide it horizontally into two equal halves. Next, divide the circle vertically as shown in figure #1. Fievel's eyes sit on the horizontal line on either side of his nose (snout). In figure # 3, you will add the bottom lip and his ears. You now have the basic construction. The details, for example, Fievel's large hat, his furry cheek hair and whiskers, should be added to suit your own fancy. Learn to make judgments about your drawing as you work it.

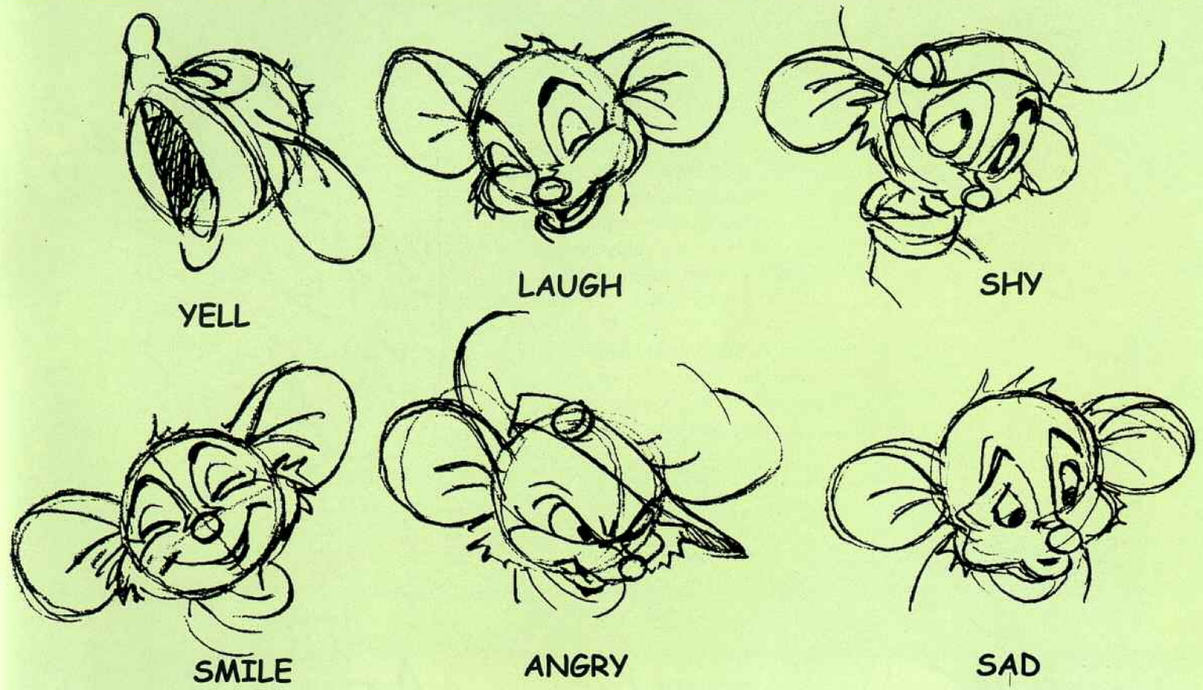
Do you like the way it's turning out? What would improve it? Have you got your proportions right? Drawing really is about making mistakes and then correcting the mistakes. Nobody gets it right the first time. You should get in the habit of relaxing and having fun. The best drawing comes from your intuition and not your logic. Having said that, trust your feelings. Drawing is very personal so please yourself! Listen to the little voice inside you for it will tell you when you've been honest.

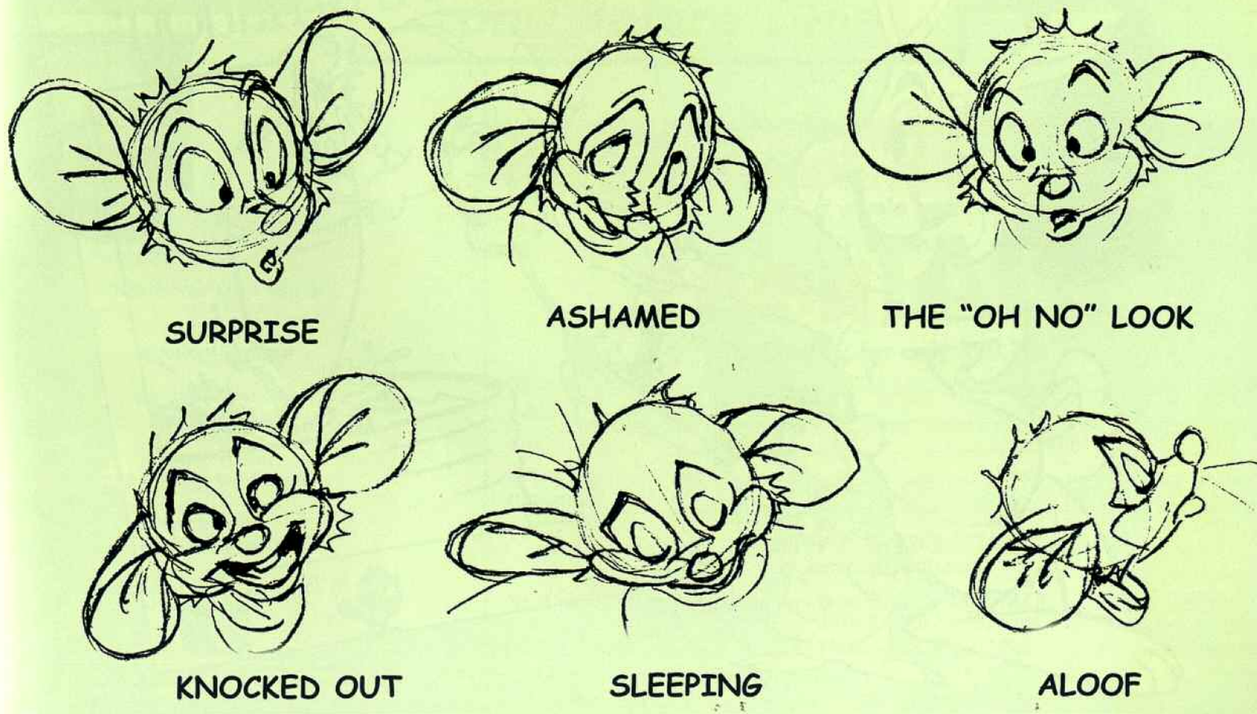
On the opposite page, there are several expressions of Fievel's face illustrated. Each one is an exercise for you to master. Make your own expression and study your face in a mirror. Can you see how the shapes of your face change? After you finish theses examples, try creating some Fievel expressions of your very own.

DRAWING THE HEAD



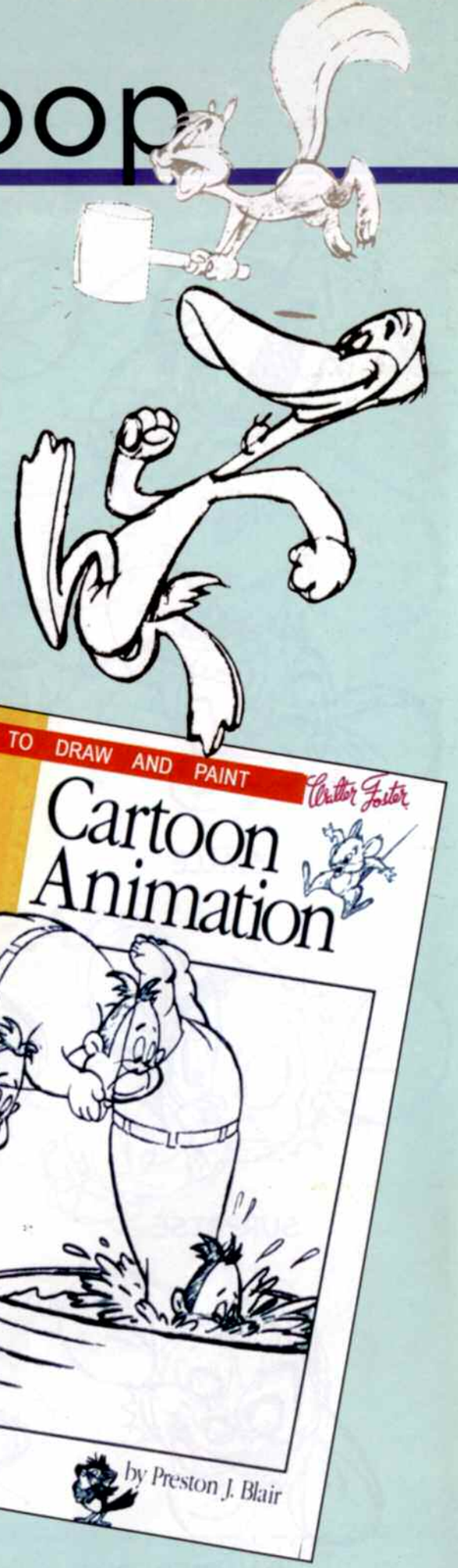
FACIAL EXPRESSIONS



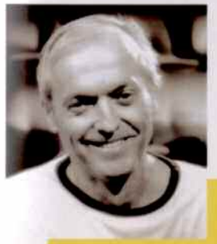


editor'sscoop

So, you want to be an animator, huh! Well, if you're really serious about this endeavor, you may want to purchase a copy of *Cartoon Animation* by Preston J. Blair. This oversized soft cover published by Walter Foster is an excellent reference book for animators and students alike. In fact, Don Bluth learned many fundamental drawing techniques from an earlier publication of this book. Some of the topics covered in this widely recognized "How To" animation book includes: Drawing construction, Stretch and Squash, Facial Expressions, Line of Action, and Character Drawing, with all of its intricate possibilities. It seems that Preston J. Blair understood the difficult challenges involved in drawing and animating. The entire book is laid out in an easy to follow format so beginners should not have any difficulties comprehending the tasks. Good luck!



Next Issue
Land Before Time



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business is rough!
How much we made
so far?